

## Opinion: Homeopathy

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There is a war underway in the Netherlands between opponents that are familiar with each other: the homeopathic and the pharmaceutical industry. The Association against Quackery is elated, while 24 percent of Dutch households will have to say goodbye to the natural products they have used for decades against all kinds of ailments. That's because Public Health Minister Edith Schippers will only allow the sales of homeopathic medicine if their health benefits have been scientifically proven. This means that 243 registered homeopathic medicines will disappear from the shelves in pharmacies and chemists. Users and suppliers of homeopathic medicines want the Second Chamber to intervene and to block the minister's measure. Blogs run by supporters of alternative healing point out that European legislation offers the option to the producers of these medicines to substantiate their health benefits without clinical research.

But Cees Renckens, a former chairman of the Association against Quackery, is elated with the measure. The government has closed its eyes for years for a lot of homeopathic swindling, he wrote in an op-ed in the Volkskrant. And pharmacists appeared to be prepared to sell these "nonsensical remedies," he wrote. "That is a disgrace."

Renckens argues that since the rise of alternative healing the government has been an accomplice to a lot of homeopathic fraud. Until 1993 the National Health Service fully reimbursed homeopathic remedies. Civil servants held speeches at the expansions of homeopathic factories, homeopaths regularly received royal decorations and Mailbox 51 distributed positive publicity about these remedies.

Renckes notes that the board for the assessment of medicines started to register homeopathic remedies in 1999 and even hired homeopathic doctors for this purpose. It became legal to advertise the effects of these remedies, "without a trace of scientific evidence," Renckes wrote.

The first registered homeopathic medicine was Vogel's Aconitum D10, a remedy against fever and neuralgia.

Renckes is, that may be clear, not a supporter of homeopathic medicine. On the contrary, he says it is a disgrace that pharmacists lowered themselves to selling these products for a little bit of extra money.

The branch organization for pharmacists demands that its members always point out to customers that the homeopathic remedy they just bought does not work. There is not a single pharmacist who does that, Renckes claims.

He commends Minister Schippers for "putting a stop to this form of speculation" and sighs that the adversaries of homeopathic quackery finally get the support they had to do without for so long. The wallet and the health of citizens will benefit, Renckens concludes.

Knowing the messenger is always half the story, so Renckens' opinion should not surprise anyone. The question is obviously: is he right or is he wrong?

Pharmacists and chemists sell 4.5 million homeopathic products every year. Supporters claim that homeopathic remedies are to be found in three quarters of Dutch households. Nobody will deny that the interest in alternative healing has skyrocketed since it emerged from obscurity somewhere in the late sixties.

We remember a story in a lifestyle magazine in the late seventies that dealt with enzyme therapy – a form of alternative healing that benefits amongst others people who suffer from migraine. The article's author spoke with people who used the therapy, and who said they had benefited from it. Yet, until this day, there is no scientific proof that enzyme therapy actually works. The people who benefit from it could not care less: they got rid of their migraine and they got their life back.

Successful retailers have a sound principle: the client is always right. In the world of illness, ailments and the solutions the medical world has to offer, this rule apparently

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does not apply. There will always be people to deny that homeopathic medicine could have any beneficial effect, and there will be those who would never use anything else – and feel good because of it.

The question is now: does it make sense for the government to hold homeopathic remedies to the same standards as pharmaceuticals?

The thing with pharmaceuticals is that they are in general more aggressive. The industry does not say this of course. It just points to the fact that a remedy is very effective. But the aggression in pharmaceuticals is also a good reason for the public health ministry to keep a keen eye on the products it allows on the market. There are plenty of stories about so-called beneficial pharmaceuticals that have horrible side-effects. The thing is, users only find this out decades later – when those side effects are beyond repair.

Homeopathic remedies work or they don't work, but their possible side-effects cannot stand in the shadow of those some pharmaceuticals may have.

Renckens may have one point though: homeopathic remedies may hurt the wallet in case they don't work. But if they really don't work, why would people keep buying them? Because the insurance reimburses the costs? That is hard to believe.

Bob Marley was right in this respect: you can fool some people sometimes, but you can't fool all the people all the time.

To cut a long story short: killing the homeopathic business does not benefit its users, but it will surely benefit the pharmaceutical industry.

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